The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times E-1
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 20 Jan '88

The peace minister

By Charlotte Hays
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Once upon a time, there was a famous activist minister. His charisma and compassion were legendary. His name was William Sloane Coffin, and in the waning days of the Reagan era he came to Washington to help pass the president's arms-reductions treaty with the Russians. Talk about strange bedfellows!

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin symbolized the protest movement of the '60s. His handsome visage popped up everywhere that mattered in those days — in Hanoi with Faberge heiress and Institute of Policy Studies benefactor Cora Weiss, on trial for conspiracy with Dr. Benjamin Spock and radical writer Paul Goodman. "If men like this are beginning to say things like this," John Chancellor intoned on NBC after Mr. Coffin helped stage a ceremony to burn draft cards in Boston in 1967, "I guess we had all better start paying attention."

Now 63, Mr. Coffin has resigned his historic pulpit at New York's Riverside Church for a brave, new venture: unifying and inspiring the American peace movement. He signed on last week as the first president of SANE/FREEZE, a newly formed anti-nuclear outfit. Top priority for 1988: passage of Ronald Reagan's INF treaty.

As such things go, Mr. Coffin might not be the most comfortable political bedfellow for Mr. Reagan. "I'm going to keep my elbow in Reagan's rib cage to make sure that the treaty is another step towards nuclear disarmament and not just a sidestep," Mr. Coffin promised during an interview here at the Ben Spock Center for Peace. He is an elegantly disheveled man in conservative charcoal-gray trousers and a striped tie loosened at the neck.

Who is this activist minister who has come to town to give peace a chance?

William Sloane Coffin is the quintessential public man; he gracefully deflects personal questions with just a hint of irritation. Nevertheless, the private man probably can be glimpsed through the stories of the four women in his life.

There were the minister's three wives: Eva Rubinstein (1956-1968), the daughter of concert pianist Arthur Rubinstein; writer Harriet Harvey (1969-1980), whose divorce testimony made the New York tabloids; and the third Mrs. Coffin, the former Virginia Randolph Witson (1984-present), who is called "Randy." She has been involved in anti-nuke theater and was running the Strafford, Vt., general store when she met the minister. Her marriage to Mr. Coffin is her second.

And, of course, in the beginning there was Catherine Butterfield Coffin, the minister's formidable mother. She courageously brought up her three children alone after her husband, William Sloane Coffin, died in 1933. He was president of New York's Metropolitan Museum and scion of the W.&J. Sloane furniture family. "Catherine's emphasis in life," a family friend recalled, "was perform, perform, perform." Moving to New Haven, Conn., when her son later became chaplain at Yale, Catherine Coffin would respond to a particularly eloquent sermon by saying, "Nice performance, Bill."

When Mr. Coffin was growing up, he seemed destined to perform on a different stage. He wanted to be a concert pianist. Catherine Coffin warmly supported her favorite son's aspirations; Uncle Henry Sloane Coffin, president of Union Theological Seminary, did not. Uncle Henry felt a boy belonged in prep school. At Uncle Henry's behest, Bill was reluctantly enrolled in Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Mass. Catherine Coffin, however, rose to the occasion. "If you do well at Deerfield," she told her son, "you can take the following year off to study piano and harmony in Paris."

Next year, the Coffins, mother and son, sailed for France and soon were ensconced in rented quarters on the Seine's Left Bank — much to Uncle Henry's chagrin. Mr. Coffin studied piano with Jacques Fevrier, associate of his future father-in-law, and harmony with Nadia Boulanger, professor of many illuminati of the '20s and '30s, including Igor Stravinsky. Adding to Mr. Coffin's nervousness, the telephone would ring at Nadia Boulanger's, and he would hear her saying, "Ah, cher Igor, mon ami. . . ."

The Paris idyll was cut short by the outbreak of World War II. The Coffins returned to the United States, where Bill Coffin was enrolled at Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass. (to which he briefly returned as chaplain in 1956). He selected Andover because it was near Boston, where he could study with Felix Fox, a well-known piano teacher. On graduating from Andover in 1942, Mr. Coffin was inducted into the military.

It was as a young Army officer in the town of Plattling, Germany, that he was involved in an event that still seems to haunt him: the tragic repatriation of Soviet soldiers.

At Yalta, the United States and Soviet Union agreed to repatriate each other's citizens after the war. For Soviet soldiers who had deserted Stalin's banner, repatriation meant certain death.

Ignorant of their fate, a group of soldiers invited Mr. Coffin, who was not ignorant of their impending doom, to a party. It was the eve of their return to Russia. In his autobiography, Mr. Coffin recounted that when a Soviet commandant bid him goodnight, he almost blurted out, " 'Get out quick.' But I didn't. Instead I drove off cursing the commandant for being so trusting."

Next day, the operation began. Mr Coffin watched several Soviets commit suicide by cutting their throats

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on broken windows to avoid returning to Russia. He has written that his part in the Plattling operation "left a burden of guilt that I am sure to carry the rest of my life."

"That was a major tragic mistake," Mr. Coffin said the other day. "I feel as badly today as I did then. I still think about it, but I try not to waste emotional energy on it."

He has written that his Plattling experience also led to his decision in 1950 to "spend three years in the CIA opposing Stalin's regime." His time in the CIA was spent training agents to infiltrate the Soviet Union for secret operations.

"Over the years," he wrote of his experience, "I have changed my mind. I now think it is unwise of the CIA to topple regimes of other countries, no matter how rotten they may be. . . ."

Mr. Coffin's next stop was the seminary. When William Sloane Coffin was in his second year at Yale's divinity school, a classmate offered him a blind date with Arthur Rubinstein's daughter. "Not on your life, not if she looks like him," Mr. Coffin replied.

As fate would have it, he instantly was smitten with Eva Rubinstein's beauty. When he first saw her, "her feet were in the fourth [ballet] position, and she was lovely." Eva spotted something she liked about him, too.

"Bill was the first man who ever talked back to my father," Eva admiringly recalled in a recent telephone interview. The maestro, however, cordially despised Mr. Coffin. When the maestro stated that he didn't want a Billy Graham for a son-in-law, Mr. Coffin shot back, "You tell him I don't want Liberace for a father-in-law." Bill Coffin and Eva Rubinstein were married in the chapel of Union Theological Seminary in December 1956.

In 1958, then 34, Mr. Coffin returned to Yale as chaplain, and his public career took off. He became in the '60s Yale's freedom-riding chaplain, idolized by students, the friend and associate of the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Andrew Young. But the private life of the chaplain was quite another matter. . . .

As aficionados of such things are wont to whisper, the devastating portrait of "Mia and the Reverend" in Gail Sheehy's book "Passages" is supposed to be the Coffins of the Yale period. "Gail Sheehy is the nearest I ever came to murder!" Eva blurted out.

"All these things were going to be used with complete camouflage. It was a very agonizing experience for Bill and me. She was an acquaintance who became a mortal enemy." Particularly annoying, according to Eva, was Miss Sheehy's choice of the name Mia — the name of Eva's good friend in real life — for the wife.

Miss Sheehy's reverend in "Passages" is a man who could "best help humanity in the aggregate" but "for the pain of those in his immediate circle, the reverend had no tolerance whatsoever. He couldn't see. He didn't hear. Around his personal emotions there was a fender of steel."

One of the memorable scenes is Mia's attempt to have a real conversation with her husband. " 'There's something we have to talk about,' she would begin gently. There was a flicker of panic in her husband's eyes. Then, as though her words were an injection of morphine, he would fall into a wooden sleep."

Less than a year after Eva and her husband were divorced, Mr. Coffin married writer Harriet Harvey. She was the ex-wife of journalist Frank Gibney, an expert on Japanese affairs. The wedding took place during three days of festivities on Harriet Harvey's island off the coast of Maine. "Never had I been able to reveal so much of myself to anybody," Mr. Coffin wrote confidently in his autobiography.

But peace did not reign in the parsonage. Mr. Coffin, at the zenith of his public career during the 1968-69 conspiracy trial in Boston, had little zeal for private life. "He had this charisma," Harriet Harvey would say later, "that drew people to him, and as long as the spotlight was on him, he was outgoing. But the moment the light was off him, he lost interest."

At one sensational point during their divorce trial, Miss Harvey stated that her husband, exasperated by her efforts to engage him in mundane conversation about family matters, had struck her a karate chop on the head. She testified that doctors found a hairline fracture to her skull. In retrospect, Miss Harvey regrets dredging up such things in court. But she was in a bind — the judge was mesmerized by Mr. Coffin's charisma. Desperate measures were in order.

It was a potentially embarrassing revelation for a minister. But Mr. Coffin met the challenge by doing what came naturally. He preached a sermon — one of his early sermons as senior minister at Riverside Church — on the divorce. "He said he came not as a person who was perfect but as a wounded healer," recalled Valerie Russell, a former Riverside deacon now with City Mission Services in Boston. "I think the congregation was very turned on by that."

Mr. Coffin's charisma remains invincible on all fronts. "There's not a nasty bone in this guy's body," Miss Harvey said over the telephone from her Westport, Conn., home. "He's not a fake. He's extraordinary in that he is able to generate tremendous enthusiasm for causes he believes in deeply." At present, Miss Harvey is busy with her memoirs, which will include a chapter dealing with her marriage to Mr. Coffin, tentatively entitled "Berrigans in the Basement."

When William Sloane Coffin took his third wife, Randy, in a Strafford, Vt., ceremony in August 1984, nobody was more pleased than wedding guest Eva Rubinstein, now a New York photographer. But there was also a poignancy to the scene. While Amy and David, the two surviving children of Mr. Coffin's first marriage, stood together for the outdoor wedding, Eva Rubinstein could look over a hill.

There, visible during the wedding, was the grave of Alex Coffin, their son, killed in a motor accident in Boston in 1983. "It was one of the most moving days in my life," she said. Randy Coffin, recently installed in the couple's Mount Pleasant house, plans to "travel with Bill. He's a divine man. I just adore him."

William Sloane Coffin's bevy of wives vie to say sweet things about him. But the first wife has the last word. "As I told Bill before he married Randy, whom I adore," said Eva Rubinstein, "he was the best and most wonderful mistake I ever made."